

# THE FIGHTERS

Entry No. 12 in Our Prize Story Competition

BY C. HAPSBURG LIEBE

**O**LD Henderson Wolfe had more moonshiner scalps at his belt than any other revenue officer in the State; and when one looked into his keen, far seeing eyes and noted the squareness of his bearded jaw, he did not wonder. He was tall, straight; his hair was iron gray; his nerves were nerves of steel. And originally Henderson Wolfe himself was a mountaineer. He had worked over the little illicit distilling plant many a day when a young man. But he had been caught, tried, fined a hundred dollars, and locked up in default of payment. His tall, broad-shouldered man with a convincing manner, had held up his wrongs in a light that showed Henderson how he was slurring the majesty of the law by making whisky without license.

After the young moonshiner had languished in prison for eight days, his mountain sweetheart had sold everything she possessed and brought the proceeds to pay her lover's fine. They had enough left to be married on. Henderson Wolfe then forswore his former occupation and launched forth as a hunter of moonshiners. And he would have told you that he did it because he loved his people, the people of the mountains. And it was that way he did love his people, and, though time made him a comparatively well-read, broad-viewed man, he never forgot that love for his people.

Henderson Wolfe had been in the revenue service for twenty years. The wife of his adoring days had long been laid to sleep the last sleep under the cedars and the ground ivy and the honeysuckle. But for an eighteen-year-old daughter his home was empty.

This young woman had been back from a girls' school in the North for half a year. She had finished with honors. Old Henderson Wolfe was pleased to the bottom of his good heart. He saw in her blue eyes and coquettish hair the perfected counterpart of his well-loved consort. To him she was the one ideal woman; she was the bloom of his life. He was all there was left that was like his Josephine.

For six months old Wolfe had been in a quandary. Elizabeth had brought home with her from the North the photograph of a very fine looking young man; and for six months she had had a letter from the North each week. She frankly confessed to her father that she loved Holton George very much.

The old revenue officer often paused by the picture and looked at it as if he would read the character of the man beneath the exterior. He told himself that there could be but one objection to that young man; he was a Yankee. Old Henderson Wolfe knew nothing about Yankees. However, he decided to know something about the man who took his name from the adored Elizabeth. It matters went a certain way, he determinedly meant to find out a few things about this Holton George. And Henderson Wolfe was sufficiently shrewd to get his ends.

**O**NE bright morning there was a knock at the front. The old servant of the law opened the door with strange greetings. It was the young man of the picture. Wolfe noted that Holton George was a well set up, clean-limbed man whose eye was as keen and whose jaw was even as square as his own. The newcomer was impudent as the stuffy little parlor, where he took old Wolfe by the shoulder and said straight from the teeth:

"Mr. Wolfe, I love your daughter, and she loves me. I want your permission to marry her." There was nothing formal in either his words or his actions. It was the presumption of certainty alone.

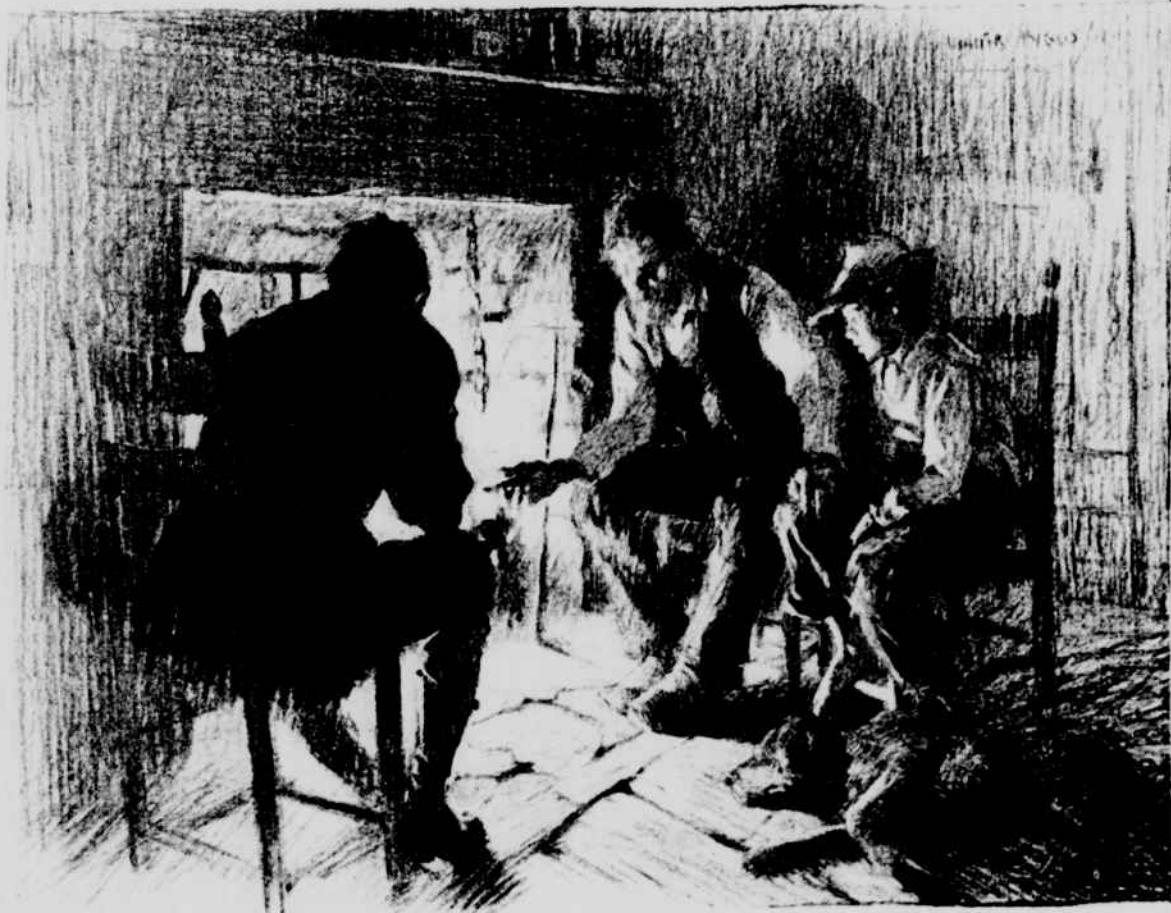
Wolfe replied, "I've been expecting this. I want Betty to be happy. Now, if she's worth having, she's worth fighting for. I am a fighter—figuratively. I admit that I want my daughter to marry a fighter. It takes a fighter to get along in this world. You understand, sir, what can do things. Are you willing to be tried?"

"By the high water, sir!" the young Northerner exclaimed crossly.

"I like that," said Wolfe, his voice warming. He led Holton George over to a window. Perhaps he had been planning. Henderson Wolfe was entirely capable of planning. "Yonder," said he, pointing to a crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains twenty miles away, "hidden in a deep cove below that highest peak, on the other side from here, is a man who has made more whisky illicitly than any two men in this State. His name is Zeke Burket. Bring him to me, if you want to marry my girl!"

There was no hesitation to the younger man's reply. George said enthusiastically, "I'll do it, or tear down that mountain in the attempt! You invest me with authority—deputize me, that is to say?"

"I do," snarled Wolfe. "Start early tomorrow morning. You'll have to walk. Take my shotgun, because you'll have to go as a hunter. Go straight, avoiding all roads. Arrive at Burket's cabin about dusk. Ask to spend the night. In the morning get the old man away from the house on some pretext or other, put the irons on



"The Infernal Dog of a Nath Conard Used a Shotgun!"

him, and bring him in. Now, remember to be careful!"

Holton George held out his hand. "I'm glad of the chance to show you that I can do things," said he. "I'll start from my hotel early in the morning. Just let me have the gun now, sir. Thank you. Goodby."

And Henderson Wolfe told his prospective son in law goodby with the air of one who is well pleased.

**A**t sunset the following day Holton George stood on the mountain crest the old revenue officer had pointed out to him from the window of his home. At his side was a well filled bag of game; there were squirrels, boomers, a pheasant, to prove his marksman-hip. By his high booted feet rested the butt of a two-barreled shotgun. For a moment he forgot that he was very tired in the aurora of the setting sun; it was beautiful, and from his point of view he thought it grand. Before him, too, was spread the loveliest panorama he had ever set eyes upon.

The man from the North was enjoying the thing hugely. About him were scrubby mountain oak, a few fire scorched and gnarled chestnut trees; over every foot of the ground were moss covered gray stones, from between which in the summer just past ferns and rattlesnake bed had grown luxuriantly. He was enthralled—the odor of the mountains, of dead leaves and dead ferns, was about him. A great spirit of absolute freedom swept over his being.

Then, from in front of the head of the cove before him, the one in which Wolfe had told him Burket lived, there came the deep-throated, keen crack of a long barreled squirrel rifle.

George pulled his fowling piece into the hollow of his arm and walked quietly toward the point whence had come the report of but a moment ago. Carefully he picked his way over the stones, over a decaying log, and began to descend. With the hunter instinct strong in him, he walked easily, picking his footsteps cautiously, along among the thickening ivy and laurel bushes, whose leaves glinted golden in the fading sunlight. So carefully did he walk that there was hardly a sound from his footsteps.

A youngish voice suddenly fell upon his ear, and it came from barely a dozen yards away. "Pap, yander's a feller with store bought clothes on and a milley shotgun!"

**T**HE Northerner turned sharply to his right. Before the end of a hollow log he saw a grizzled old man kneeling. At his side there stood the youth whom he had just heard speak. The old mountaineer rose, brushing the earth from his knees.

"Them no-hammer shotguns always reminded me of a dehorned cow," he remarked, as if for want of anything else more appropriate. "Good ev'nin', Stranger!"

"Good evening," returned Holton George, pausing, with evident interest. "What's in the log?"

"Squirrel," answered the old man. "I've always

prided myself on shootin' 'em in the head; but this'n, by Hector! I missed all but a cripple. Must a moved. I hate to cripple things. It wussn't killin' 'em. I've been tryin' to twist it out with a forked stick; but it's no use."

George put out his hand. "My name is George," he announced. "Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"George?" wondered the old mountaineer. "George who?"

"George—Holton George."

"Oh," the old man smiled. "Kinder like the place in the Book that says the last shall be the first and the first shall be the last. Well, sir, I'm Zeke Burket. This chap here's my boy, Bud. You're a huntin', I reckon?"

"Yes," answered George; "and I've gone too far. I'd be glad if you could tell me where I could spend the night. I'm willing to pay for all accommodations."

"You sh'll stay all night with me, Mr. George," Burket said decisively. "I never took a cent for keepin' a man all night in my life; so don't say any more bout payin' for accommodations. The only trouble is, I wonder if you can put up with our way o' dom'?"

"There'll be no trouble there, I'm sure," George hastened to say.

"Then we'll go. Bud, call old Rock and the fice. Put old Rock at yan end o' the log, and you stay at this'n. Put the fice in the log. It'll bring that squirrel out into old Rock's mouth. Stranger, let's go."

Holton George took up his fowling piece and followed the old mountaineer down the cove. On the way to the cabin he noted that a few acres just above the house had been cleared and that they were covered with cornstalks and the stubs of tobacco plants.

Old Zeke Burket's cabin was built of whole logs, notched at the end, and chinked between with split, square pieces of wood and daubed with clay from the mountainside. The roof was covered with boards which had been made by the laborious process of splitting with maul and wedge. The floor alone had seen the sawmill; but even this had not been dressed, except by long wear from shoe bottoms. George noted a racoon's skin nailed to a great hemlock tree at the corner of the rude habitation.

A wide fireplace filled with roaring oak logs greeted them as they stepped across the doorstep to the main room. To the guest this appealed especially; for the day had been cool, and the mountain air was thin. Burket took his hat and gamebag, which he placed on a crude table. The shotgun he placed in a rack overhead. Then the mountaineer drew up two homemade, split-bottomed chairs and offered one to his guest. As he made as if to take a seat also, a woman's voice from the other room called to him, and he went immediately in answer to it.

**T**o Holton George this mountain home was a novelty. He noted that a ladder led up to the loft, and that there was a very plump, comfortable looking bed in the